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COMMENT

LITTLE THEATRES AND POETIC PLAYS

A RECENT visit to St. Louis enabled me to see Alfred Kreymborg's three *Plays for Poem-mimes*, which were given by the Players' Club at the theatre of the Artists' Guild on the evening of Monday, December 3d. The performance gave me quite a thrill, for the plays acted extremely well—indeed, sprang to life in the presentation with a power which proclaimed the born playwright. Two of the plays I had read, *Lima Beans* in print and *When the Willow Nods* in manuscript—read with admiration for the humane wit of the first and the searching poetic beauty of the second. But as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so that of a play is in the acting: it required the excellent performance of the Players' Club to convince me that we have in Mr. Kreymborg a poetic and interpretive playwright of original and authentic power, a claimant for wide recognition on the American stage.

It was the first performance on any stage for *When the Willow Nods* and *Manikin and Minikin*. The former is a monologue in free verse, a running comment half-whimsical, half-pitiful, uttered, Greek-chorus fashion, by a quiet, seated, cloaked and hooded figure, while a boy and girl act and dance out their little love-affair in pantomime. It would be impossible to over-state the beauty of Orrick Johns' interpretation of the enigmatic speaker. Mr. Johns, being a poet and having a fine voice, might be expected to read the lines

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

simply and with full sense of rhythmic values but only a true histrionic instinct could have kept him always in the picture, always the master of the stage.

Manikin and Minikin is a dialogue between two Louis Quinze ornaments on a mantel-piece, the figures beautifully dressed and posed. And *Lima Beans*, which has been played a little east and west, is a more or less satiric farce conceived in the gayest possible whimsical spirit; and it was set and acted in the same mood.

Besides this Players' Club, St. Louis has another amateur company, that of the Artists' Guild, which this year has engaged a professional director, Irving Pichel. I was delighted to find that Mr. Pichel has designs upon the play by Wallace Stevens to which POETRY gave a prize over a year ago, *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*. If all goes well, St. Louis may get ahead of Chicago, which printed this play, and New York, the home of the poet, by producing it next February.

The advance of dramatic art in this country, especially of the poetic drama, is now the affair of the so-called "little theatres," which have sprung up so numerous since Maurice Brown started the Chicago Little Theatre about the time POETRY began. In fact, Chicago's precedence antedates even the Little Theatre, for the New Theatre started the ball rolling in the season of 1906-7, the Drama Players under Donald Robertson pushed it along in 1907-9; and the Hull House Theatre, which had been giving plays even earlier, was reorganized for progressive work under Mrs. Pelham in

Little Theatres and Poetic Plays

1907. The movement started by these courageous pioneers has gained such headway that now even Broadway is trembling—opening its dazed eyes to the vitality of a demand for more imaginative and beautiful work in the theatre than the typical commercial manager has believed the public would stand for. The typical commercial manager and the typical newspaper critic has spent much time and space laughing at the efforts of these amateurs, who, out of love of the art, with little thought of self or pelf, have done the pioneer experimental work which the professionals, preoccupied with self and pelf, refused to do. While the professionals have walked in their rut and stuck to the sure thing, these amateur companies have offered the new thing, the uncertain thing, have given the young playwright a chance to try out his experiments and thereby learn his trade, the young poet a chance to test his capacity for the stage. And now the professionals find, to their amazement, that the sure thing is no longer sure, and that a group of young playwrights—poets and prosers both—is springing up in whose introduction to the public they have had no share. They will have to take lessons of the little theatres—indeed, the process is beginning. And when Broadway bends a suppliant knee, may our young playwrights of the new movement accept no compromise!

It is a matter of deep regret to POETRY that the Chicago Little Theatre, whose work has been so essential in the movement, has found the financial problem too difficult and has now definitely brought its labors to a close. Since its

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

curtain first rose in November, 1912, its director, Maurice Browne, has given important and significant productions, and its chief scenic artist, Raymond Johnson, has introduced beautiful and original effects of line, color and lighting. As I review its five-year list of forty plays, besides nine for puppets—plays comic and tragic, old and new, foreign and native—the most important and significant of all seems to me Cloyd Head's *Grotesques*. If I give this production precedence over Ibsen, Strindberg, Schnitzler and Andrews, over Oscar Wilde and Synge and Yeats, over Shaw and Allan Monkhouse and Leonard Merrick, over even the beautiful productions of *The Trojan Women* and *Medea*—with Mrs. Browne wonderful beyond words in the latter play—it is because the special purpose of the little theatre seems to me to produce the modern and native thing, to try the immediate experiment, rather than to present old plays or foreign plays, which, in many cases, have had other local productions.

Mr. Head's play was a modern and native poetic interpretation of life, involving moreover a scenic scheme of great beauty and originality; and therefore the success of it, the special thrill that it gave, was of more value to the art, to "the movement," than the success of *Medea*, of *Rosmersholm*, of *The Shadowy Waters*, or even of *Dierdre of the Sorrows*, beautiful and significant as these are. It was more valuable because it was ours, because it uttered our own immediate feeling, because the poet who wrote it was on the spot to see it and learn from it.

Little Theatres and Poetic Plays

Other plays by modern poets produced by Mr. Browne are Rupert Brooke's dark tragedy, *Lithuania*, Gibson's *Womenkind*, Lord Dunsany's *Lost Silk Hat*, Mrs. Frank's *Jael*, three short plays by Mrs. Aldis, a gay comedy by Alice Brown, and Mr. Browne's own *King of the Jews*. The list should be longer and more adventurous, perhaps, and one might wish that the curtain had rung down on a more experimental play than *Candida*. But the record of the Chicago Little Theatre is a proud one, and fundamental in any consideration of the new dramatic movement, as the authors of four recent books on the subject agree.

I intended to discuss the work in poetic drama done by some of the other little theatres, but space forbids more than a brief mention. In Chicago the Players' Workshop tried numerous experiments last year, among them *Brown*, by Maxwell Bodenheim and William Saphier, which beautifully symbolized the growth and final obliteration of life on earth; and a fanciful thing called *The Wonder-hat*, by Kenneth Goodman and Ben Hecht. This year the Workshop's successor, the Philistine Theatre, has given two poetic plays; one, *Dead Eyes*, by H. H. Ewers, being tiresomely conventional, and the other, *Lady Lotus Eyes*, by Benjamin Purrington, of San Francisco, a delicate Japanese idyl, delicately played. The Philistine hopes for a new theatre on the North Side next year, and an ambitious group on the far South Side has been given possession of a disused school-house in which to develop its large plans.

In New York the Washington Square Players were, I believe, first in the field—if we except the Neighborhood

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

Playhouse on the East Side. I saw them give a good performance of Zoë Akins' rather lyrical melodrama in verse, *The Magical City*, and other interesting one-acters. But this company, having gone over to Broadway, is now somewhat tempted by the fat god of commerce. To the Portmanteau Players—also of New York, though they have been lingering in Chicago with that gold-mine, *Seventeen*—to them and their director, Stuart Walker, we owe the adequate introduction of Lord Dunsany to this country, as well as other high services.

The Provincetown Players and the Greenwich Village Players are the latest adventurers in New York, the former in MacDougal Street, the latter in that new Montmartre, Sheridan Square. The former have given this year James Oppenheim's *Night*, a poetic dialogue in which Science, Religion, Poetry, and finally Love in the person of her husband, try to console a woman for the loss of her child; also two satires in poetic prose by Messrs. Bodenheim and Saphier. The Provincetown company, under the presidency of George Cram Cook, formerly of Chicago, is a true workshop, giving only first productions of native plays. We rejoice to hear that its seating capacity has been strained. The Greenwich Villagers have given one poetic play thus far, and that rather conventional—*Behind the Watteau Picture*, by Robert E. Rogers.

The Arts and Crafts Theatre of Detroit, under the directorate of Sam Hume, is the first theatre in America to follow consistently, perhaps too consistently, the Gordon

Little Theatres and Poetic Plays

Craig ideas, and it has the finest modern scenic equipment, including a sky-dome. But its repertory thus far is rather conservative.

Mrs. Laura Sherry has been adventurous with the Wisconsin Players, giving this year *Carlos Among the Candles* and another by Wallace Stevens in both Wisconsin and New York. Aline Barnsdall has tried some interesting experiments in Los Angeles. Thomas Wood Stevens, formerly of Chicago, has now a great opportunity as director of the Dramatic Arts Department of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, but a few plays by Kenneth Sawyer Goodman are the only modern experiments he has tried thus far. Baltimore, Duluth, Boston, even Philadelphia, also certain universities, are contributing more or less to the movement—it is impossible even to mention all the little companies and clubs. Let the good work go on. *H. M.*

AMERICAN VERSE AND ENGLISH CRITICS

I wish English critics who discuss American poetry would provide themselves with the evidence. Mr. Edward Garnett, in his *Critical Notes on American Poetry* published in the *Atlantic*, makes no mention of Carl Sandburg or Vachel Lindsay, and his estimate of Ezra Pound's work is based on juvenilia—nothing later than 1911, though Mr. Pound's work is published on the other side and might easily have been obtained. Mr. Garnett has "been told" that "he is at his best in his translations from the Chinese." And with this casual remark, he rests his case against Mr. Pound.